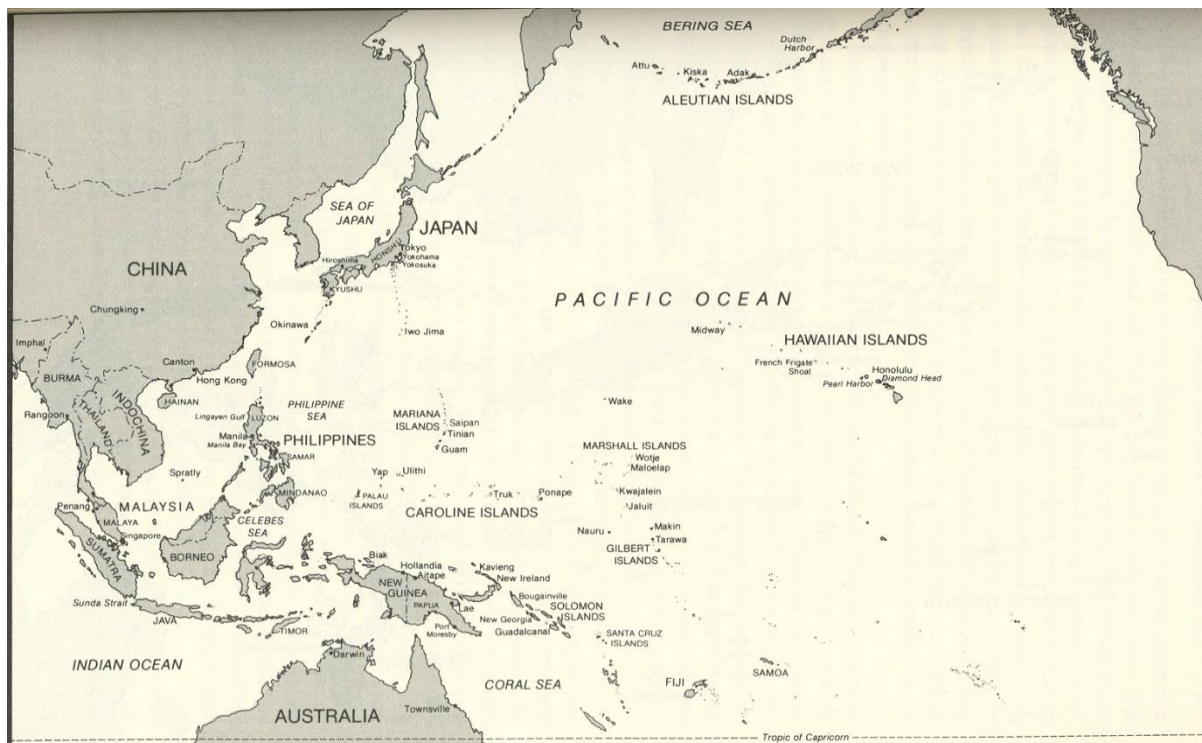


Yap seems an unlikely topic for a *History Today* article. This tiny island in Micronesia, what is now part of the Caroline Islands, has never attracted much international interest. But, at one time, it was very important and was actually the scene of one of an important American cryptologic achievement.



*Yap is in the west of the Caroline Islands, which are north of New Guinea.*

As has been reported before by CCH, the United States out-negotiated the Japanese at the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference in 1921-1922. Thanks to the work of Herbert O. Yardley's New York City-based Cipher Bureau, the United States learned that the Japanese would actually settle for a lower limit of capital ship tonnage than had been sought by their negotiators. The final ratio was 5:5:3:1.75:1.75, the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy respectively.

Far less known is that the Cipher Bureau was able to pull off another cryptologic feat at roughly the same time. The United States was then contesting Japanese

commercial control of Yap. The Cipher Bureau learned that the Japanese negotiators were showing flexibility in their negotiating position. Perhaps more importantly, it learned that Japan's allies in the dispute, i.e., the major European powers, were beginning to side with the Americans as the talks proceeded.

Here is some background to the story. Yap, just prior to World War I (1914-1918), had belonged to the Germans. The Japanese, with Germany preoccupied with the war, consequently occupied it. As decided at the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919, Japan received i.e., a legal protectorate, for all of the German held territory north of the Equator (in this case, Yap); this later was confirmed by a League of Nations mandate. The Americans, however, did not ratify the Versailles Treaty and so did not feel bound by it.

The reason for the conflict, though, was that several international cables "earthed" on Yap. Japan, thanks to the Versailles Treaty, now had control over them. Specifically, there were three main cables: Yap-Guam; Yap-Menado (in Dutch controlled Indonesia); and Yap-Shanghai. The United States wanted at least partial control of the Guam cable since Guam had been U.S. territory since 1898. The United States took the position that Yap itself should be internationalized.

Japan, believing itself to be legally correct, insisted on control of the Guam cable and was supported in its position by the European powers, e.g., Great Britain and France, who had signed the Versailles Treaty. Dispute over control of the cables was the primary reason for an international communications conference in 1920-1921. Settlement of the Yap question did not end with this conference though. It would not be resolved until February 1922, with U.S. commercial rights to the island finally obtained via a special US-Japanese treaty. The United States, in return, agreed to respect the Japanese mandate over Yap.

Yardley's Cipher Bureau decrypts closely monitored the Yap negotiations. They revealed a major weakness in the Japanese negotiating position, i.e., an eagerness to settle as long as the United States respected the mandate. Similarly, the decrypts demonstrated the unreliability of Japan's allies, Great Britain and France, in particular the former. These allies, undoubtedly intimidated by U.S. financial power (the dollar > yen), were beginning to abandon Japan in the dispute. These

Cipher Bureau decrypts went to Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, who aggressively promoted the U.S. case vis-à-vis Yap. The United States agreed to respect the mandate but got what it sought regarding the Guam cable. In the end, it was a victory for American commerce as Hughes had played a bad hand well.

Most of the Cipher Bureau's decrypts about Yap have been released to the public but CCH was able to review three which are apparently still unavailable and will discuss their impact in a future *History Today* article.

For earlier CCH articles on the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference, see

Sources: *Japanese Diplomatic Secrets* (1933-Manuscript), an Analytical Article from *Cryptologia*, Emil Levine, 2001; background material on Yap and respective conferences

508 caption: a map of the Pacific Ocean, with major islands marked.